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Author(s): Cedric Robinson

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A CRITIQUE OF W.E.B. DU BOIS' BLACK RECONSTRUCTION

by Cedric Robinson

W. E. B. DuBois was a black man, a black scholar-historian and evidently an independent Marxist thinker at the time he wrote *Black Reconstruction in America 1860-1880*, first published in 1935.* As a black man, DuBois was sensitive to the contradictions in American society—in particular the material force of racism. He was even more *conscious* of it since it had not been an active and dominating element in his early years. He was a young man by the time he confronted the culture of racism. As a black scholar-historian, DuBois had had an immediate and profound experience with false histories. Both his training at Harvard with its history department largely influenced by German historiography and his studies in Berlin had left him with an acute sense for myth and propaganda in history.

As an independent thinker, DuBois possessed no obligations to Marxist-Leninist dogma, nor to the vagaries of historical analysis and interpretation which characterized American Communist thought. Given these attributes, DuBois obtained the skills to seize the advantage

created by the historical moment of the crisis of capitalism, the Depression.

... somebody in each era must make clear the facts with utter disregard to his own wish and desire and belief. What we have got to know, so far as possible, are the things that actually happened in the world ... the historian has no right, posing as scientist, to conceal or distort facts; and until we distinguish between these two functions of the chronicler of human action, we are going to render it easy for a muddled world out of sheer ignorance to make the same mistake ten times over. (*Black Reconstruction*, p. 722)

* * *

What is the object of writing the history of Reconstruction? ... it is simply to establish the Truth, on which Right in the future may be built. We shall never have a science of history until we have in our colleges men who regard the truth as more important than the defense of the white

CEDRIC ROBINSON is Chairman of the Department of Afro-American and African Studies, State University of New York, Binghamton. He received the B.A. at the University of California, Berkeley, 1963, and the Ph.D. from Stanford University, 1975. This essay is an excerpt from a book length work he is writing on black American Marxists.

* All quotations here are taken from *Black Reconstruction in America*, New York: Meridian Books, 1968.

race, and who will not deliberately encourage students to gather thesis material in order to support a prejudice or buttress a lie. (*Black Reconstruction*, p. 725)

Among the several truths that DuBois set out to establish in *Black Reconstruction* there were a number which related directly to Marxist-Leninist theory. Specifically, his ideas concerned the emergence of capitalism, the nature of revolutionary consciousness and the nature of revolutionary organization. In *Black Reconstruction*, DuBois would insist on the world historical significance of American slavery in the emergence of modern capitalism and imperialism. He would as well demonstrate historically the revolutionary force of slave and peasant laborers—in opposition to a reactionary industrial working class. Finally, DuBois would question the presumed roles of a vanguard and the masses in the development of revolutionary consciousness and effective revolutionary action.

SLAVERY AND CAPITALISM

In the beginning pages of *Black Reconstruction*, DuBois identified the fundamental contradiction in American history. The contradiction would subvert America's founding ideology, distort its institutions, traumatize its social relations and class formations, and, in the 20th century, confuse its rebels and revolutionists slavery.

From the day of its birth, the anomaly of slavery plagued a nation which asserted the equality of all men, and sought to derive powers of government from the consent of the governed. Within sound of the voices of those who said this lived more than half a million black slaves, forming nearly one-fifth of the population of a new nation. (*Black Reconstruction*, p. 3)

* * *

It was thus the black worker, as founding stone of a new economic system in the nineteenth century and for the modern world, who brought civil war in America. He was its underlying cause, in spite of every effort to base the strife upon union

and national power. (*Black Reconstruction*, p. 15)

Now let us pay close attention to what DuBois was saying. Slavery was the specific historical institution through which the black *worker* had been introduced to the New World. However, it was not as *slaves* that one could come to an understanding of the significance that these black men, women and children had to American development, but as *workers*. (His first chapter is entitled "The Black Worker.") The language of his analysis was quite important to DuBois. It was a part of his beginning of the transformation of the historiography of American civilization—the renaming of things.

In the first three chapters of his work, DuBois established the rules of analysis. The institution of American slave labor was a particular historical development of capitalism organizing the exploitation of the surplus value of the labor of African-American workers. It was a *subsystem* of world capitalism.

Black labor became the foundation stone not only of the Southern social structure, but of Northern manufacture and commerce, of the English factory system, of European commerce, of buying and selling on a world-wide scale; new cities were built on the results of black labor, and a new labor problem involving all white labor arose both in Europe and America. (*Black Reconstruction*, p. 5)

American slavery also consisted of social relations given their character by the ideology of white racial superiority.

... there was in 1863 a real meaning to slavery different from what we may apply to the laborer today. It was in part psychological, the enforced personal feeling of inferiority, the calling of another Master; the standing with hat in hand. It was the helplessness. It was the defenselessness of family life. It was the submergence below the arbitrary will of any sort of individual. (*Black Reconstruction*, p. 9)

* * *

[The South's] subservient religious leaders reverted to the "curse of Canaan"; [its] pseudo-scientists gathered and supplemented all available doctrines of racial inferiority; [its] scattered schools and pedantic periodicals repeated these legends . . . a basis in reason, philanthropy and science was built up for Negro slavery. (*Black Reconstruction*, p. 39)

All of this was necessary for the persistence of slavery through the 17th and 18th centuries, and for its meteoric development in the early 19th century.¹

With regard to this first issue—the relationship between the destruction of slavery and the emergence of modern capitalism and imperialism—DuBois recognized that the American Reconstruction period was *the* historical moment in the developing world politico-economic system. This was the moment when world capitalism assumed the character which would persist into the twentieth century.

The abolition of American slavery started the transportation of capital from white to black countries where slavery prevailed, with the same tremendous and awful consequences upon the laboring classes of the world which we see about us today. When raw material could not be raised in a country like the United States, it could be raised in the tropics and semi-tropics under a dictatorship of industry, commerce and manufacture and with no free farming class.

The competition of a slave-directed agriculture in the West Indies and South America, in Africa and Asia, eventually ruined the economic efficiency of agriculture in the United States and in Europe and precipitated the modern economic degradation of the white farmer, while it put into the hands of the owners of the machine such a monopoly of raw material that their domination of white labor was more and more complete (*Black Reconstruction*, p. 48)

According to DuBois, this was not a necessary development but the one which followed upon the dismantling and destruction of the "dictatorship of labor" established in the southern U.S. during the Reconstruction.

. . . there began to rise in America in 1876 a new capitalism and a new enslavement of labor . . . The world wept because within the exploiting group of New World masters, greed and jealousy became so fierce that they fought for trade and markets and materials and slaves all over the world until at last in 1914 the world flamed in war. The fantastic structure fell, leaving grotesque Profits and Poverty, Plenty and Starvation, Empire and Democracy, staring at each other across World Depression. (*Black Reconstruction*, p. 634)

Rather than seeing this process as inevitable due to the dialectic between the modes and relations of production, DuBois argued that it was made possible by the ideologies of racism and, to a lesser extent, individualism. It was these ideologies as historical forces which had precluded the emergence of a powerful labor movement in the U.S.—a movement consisting of the 9 million ex-slave and peasant workers of the South. The force of these ideologies manifested itself after the Civil War when these workers did not move to the next logical step: the institutionalization of their historical convergence in order to dominate the Reconstruction period's dictatorship of labor. Without this movement the revolution begun in 1854 with John Brown's Kansas raids would not continue.

LABOR, CAPITALISM AND SLAVERY

DuBois had stated as early as 1915 that the "labor aristocracy" which was the result of the trade unionism of a materialistic labor movement—in Germany, England and France as well as in the United States—was a crucial support to the imperialism and colonialism of the very late 19th century.²

In the U.S. black and non-black labor became politically opposed "instead of becoming one great party . . ." The Northern non-black working class movement effectively excluded the freedmen, the slaves *and* the five million poor whites of

the South. It was even more specifically exclusive after 1850 as it concentrated on a base of skilled industrial workers and craftsmen. But it was a more generalized antagonism which would develop between black and non-black workers.

During the Civil War itself, the division between slave and free labor would erupt into mob actions against blacks. With the enactment of the Draft laws in 1863, and with the encouragement of "pro-slavery and pro-Southern" Copperheads of the North, the frustrations of the non-black workers with their living and working conditions and the war itself was turned against blacks. In the summer of 1863, hundreds of blacks were killed by mobs of workers in New York City.

The report of the Merchants' Committee on the Draft Riot says of the Negroes: "driven by the fear of death at the hands of the mob, who the week previous had, as you remember, brutally murdered by hanging on trees and lamp posts, several of their number, and cruelly beaten and robbed many others, burning and sacking their houses, and driving nearly all from the streets, alleys and docks upon which they had previously obtained an honest though humble living—these people had been forced to take refuge on Blackwell's Island, at police stations, on the outskirts of the city, in the swamps and woods back of Bergen, New Jersey, at Weeksville, and in the barns and out-houses of the farmers of Long Island and Morrisania." (*Black Reconstruction*, p. 103)

Again and again, in *Black Reconstruction*, in his *Crisis* editorials and other works, DuBois would return to this period in order to identify the precedents for racial violence in the labor movement of the 20th century. It also provided for him a generic explanation for the traditional skepticism found among blacks for organized labor.

What was true for the mainstream of the American labor movement was also quite significant for its radical segments. Because mid-19th-century socialism had been largely transferred from Europe, it

was even less capable of resisting the corrosive influence of slavery than the native movement. This was the case for both Marxist and non-Marxist socialists. The precedents established during this period, to say the least, would be of no substantial help to 20th-century socialists whether or not their programs directly or indirectly addressed 'the Negro Problem.'

Even when the Marxian ideas arrived, there was a split; the earlier representatives of the Marxian philosophy in America agreed with the older Union movement in deprecating any entanglement with the abolition controversy. After all, abolition represented capital. The whole movement was based on mawkish sentimentality, and not on the demands of the workers, at least of the white workers. And so the early American Marxists simply gave up the idea of intruding the black worker into the socialist commonwealth at that time. (*Black Reconstruction*, pp. 24-25)

Though there were exceptions, the lack of consensus on the interests of black and non-black workers was fairly consistent throughout the labor movement. The perceived threat which an emancipated slave labor posed to the market value of free labor; the differences presumed to exist between black and non-black workers with respect to the skills each group possessed to meet the demands of labor and the labor movement; the anticipated role to which capitalists would assign blacks—these issues confused and frustrated the progressive elements in the labor movement.

Consequently whether one speaks of those who saw the movement in politico-electoral terms, or those who advocated revolutionary violence, or those who were committed to economic trade unionism, they all were most often at best ambivalent toward black liberation and progress.

1. See Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman, *Time on the Cross*, Vol. II, 1974, pp. 20-29.

2. See DuBois' "The African Roots of the War," *Atlantic Monthly*, May, 1915, pp. 707-14.

Racism became a material force within, now, a different constellation of forces, and immigrant and poor white workers came to oppose the black slave worker. After the Civil War, U.S. social consciousness accepted the division of the working classes into immigrant and white, ex-slave and, later, 'Negro.' More than twenty years before the application of *Black Reconstruction* (1935) DuBois had recognized this as a contradiction in the labor movement:

THE CRISIS believes in organized labor . . . For such reasons we carry on our front cover the printers' union label . . . We do this in spite of the fact, as well known to us as to others, that the "conditions satisfactory" to labor men in this city include the deliberate exclusion from decent-paying jobs of every black man whom white workingmen can exclude on any pretense . . .

Whatever the tactics, the result is the same for the mass of white workingmen in America; beat or starve the Negro out of his job if you can by keeping him out of the union; or if you must admit him, do the same thing inside union lines . . . So long as union labor fights for humanity, its mission is divine; but when it fights for a clique of Americans, Irish or German monopolists who have cornered or are trying to corner the market on a certain type of service, and are seeking to sell that service at a premium, while other competent workmen starve, they deserve themselves the starvation which they plan for their darker and poorer fellows.³

During the intervening years between this statement's publication and the appearance of *Black Reconstruction*, DuBois' anger did not dissipate. If anything, his analysis grew more incisive, when it reappeared in his major historical work:

The . . . color caste founded and retained by capitalism was adopted, forwarded and approved by white labor, and resulted in subordination of colored labor to white profits the world over. Thus the majority of the world's laborers, by the insistence of white labor, became the basis of a system of industry which ruined democracy and showed its perfect fruit in World War and Depression. And this book seeks to tell that story. (*Black Reconstruction*, p. 30)

The failure of blacks to achieve a consciousness of themselves as a class was not a consequence of the absence of the concentration of production, as some Marxists might presume, for in the North workers had had this experience yet their labor movement was predominantly trade unionist and non-revolutionary. On the other hand, in the South where the character of production with regard to labor concentration was more ambiguous, it was these workers, black and white, who had produced the "General Strike" which was decisive in ending the Civil War. For DuBois, the general strike began with the Civil War, in 1861. Drawing upon reports written at the time, DuBois asserts that the desertion, flight, and sabotage effected by blacks was the substantive event of the Civil War.

The General Strike had not been planned nor centrally organized. Instead, DuBois had termed as a general strike the total impact on the secessionist South of a series of actions circumstantially related to each other. Some two hundred thousand Blacks, most of them slaves, had become part of the Union's military force. These and an even larger number of blacks had withdrawn their productive labor and paramilitary services from the Confederacy, transferring a substantial portion of them to the Union. In addition, tens of thousands of slaves and poor whites had emigrated from the South. The former were escaping slavery, the latter their poverty and the demands and ravages of war. The result was to weaken critically the secessionists. These events were a consequence of contradictions within southern society rather than of a revolutionary vanguard that knit these phenomena into a historical force.

After the Civil War, it was a very different ordering which would be required to integrate these phenomena into a social movement. To accomplish this the ideolo-

gies of Southern society would have had to have been transcended. This was not done.

... the power of the Negro vote in the South was certain to go gradually toward reform.

It was this contingency that the poor whites of all grades feared. It meant to them a reestablishment of that subordination under Negro labor which they had suffered during slavery. They, therefore, interposed by violence to increase the natural antagonism between Southerners of the planter class and Northerners who represented the military dictatorship as well as capital. . . . The efforts at reform, therefore, at first widely applauded, one by one began to go down before a new philosophy which represented understanding between the planters and poor whites . . . it was accompanied by . . . eagerness on the part of the poor whites to check the demands of the Negroes by any means, and by willingness to do the dirty work of the revolution that was coming, with its blood and crass cruelties, its bitter words, upheaval and turmoil. This was the birth and being of the Ku Klux Klan (*Black Reconstruction*, p. 623)

But it was not merely a matter of the antagonisms of the poor whites against the blacks being revitalized by the prominence assumed by blacks during the Reconstruction period. The "deep economic foundation" for these antagonisms was in fact being challenged by proposals put forward by black legislators to alter radically land tenure. Rather it was the remnants of the Southern ruling class which focused the attention of poor whites onto the ex-slaves. The ruling class had been so weakened by the war that for the first time it became aggressive in its recruitment of the poor whites as allies.

The masters feared their former slaves' success far more than their anticipated failure. They lied about the Negroes. They accused them of theft, crime, moral enormities and laughable grotesqueries. They forestalled the danger of a united Southern labor movement by appealing to the fear and hate of white labor and offering them alliance and leisure. They encouraged them to ridicule Negroes and beat them, kill and burn their bodies. The planters even gave

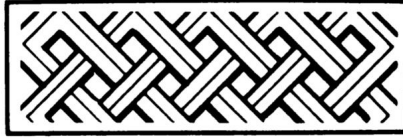
the poor whites their daughters in marriage, and raised a new oligarchy on the tottering, depleted foundations of the old oligarchy, a mass of new rulers the more ignorant, intolerant and ruthless because of their inferiority complex. And thus was built a Solid South impervious to reason, justice or fact. (*Black Reconstruction*, p. 633)

It was in this fashion that the bond between the two elements of the Southern working class failed to materialize. By necessity, DuBois felt, blacks fixed class alliances with Northern capitalists and petty bourgeois Radical Republicans. Both alliances were by nature short-lived. Once Northern capital had penetrated the Southern economy sufficiently to displace the Southern capitalists and to dominate its future development it ceased to depend on black electorates and state legislatures controlled by blacks and members of the Northern white petty bourgeoisie. The alliance ended with the withdrawal of federal troops from the South and the destruction of the governments supported by federal force.

By the 1880s, the undercapitalized character of Southern agrarian production was established and the need for external sources of raw materials demonstrated. In Mexico, the Philippines, Haiti, the Caribbean and the Pacific Islands and elsewhere, Northern capitalists would begin to try their hand at slavery, in the forms of colonialism and imperialism.

In American slavery, DuBois recognized a world-historical phenomenon: not only had slavery been a critical means of the primitive accumulation of capital during capitalism's development but it also provided the structures characteristic of the relationship between the monopoly capitalist system and non-capitalist sectors of the world. Further, DuBois had come to

3. "Organized Labor," in Julius Lester (ed.), *The Seventh Son*, Vol. 2, 1971, pp. 301-302. The editorial originally appeared in *Crisis*, July, 1912.



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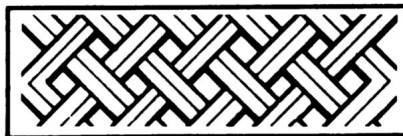
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understand the historical and ideological processes through which this had occurred. The destruction of American slavery had been the consequence of a social revolution—a dictatorship of the proletariat—destroyed in its turn by the real force of racism acting on the American working class. Yet just as significant as an understanding of the historical role of ideology was the realization that non-industrial workers were a revolutionary social force in capitalist society.

With respect to class consciousness, DuBois perceived that official Marxism had reduced this complex phenomenon to a thin political shell consisting of formulae for the dominance of state and/or party of workers' movements. In order to resist this tendency, DuBois sought to reintroduce the dialectic in its Hegelian form as the cunning of reason. No party could substitute itself for the revolutionary instrument of history: a people moved to action by the social and material conditions of its existence.

SPECIAL ISSUE OF THE BLACK SCHOLAR ON CUBA

The entire June 1977 issue of THE BLACK SCHOLAR will be devoted to reports on a trip to Cuba last fall by a delegation of black artists and cultural workers. It will contain firsthand reports, interviews, photos and related materials. Don't miss this historic issue! If you are not a subscriber, order either through your newsstand or bookstore, or from us direct: Cuba Issue, THE BLACK SCHOLAR, P.O. Box 908, Sausalito, CA 94965.